

March 25, 2017

Good morning Senators Doyle, Kissel and distinguished members of the Judiciary Committee:

My name is Barbara Fair and I am a West Haven resident and a long time supporter of shifting the way the Criminal Justice system operates in this state. I am also a parent whose son on his 17th birthday was sent to Northern Correctional facility where he was held for months. Nearly 2 decades later he is just beginning to show signs of recovery, a sense of stability in his life and on a path to mental wellness.

Because of my past experiences with having a loved one in solitary confinement I am a ***strong supporter of Raised Bill 7302***, an act concerning significantly reducing the use of solitary confinement in Connecticut prisons and providing opportunities for training and staff wellness. It is my hope that this committee will not delay taking an important step toward humanizing the prison system.

This bill will greatly reduce the use of isolation which effectively reduces the incidence of mental illness which subsequently reduces the incidence of prisoner and staff assaults. Facilities will actually be safer as a result of the work that you do today. Opponents will say that we need these spaces for the "worst of the worst" when in reality these spaces breed "the worst". Many nonviolent prisoners were placed there arbitrarily and for prolonged lengths of time. This needs to stop.

There are numerous studies stating that solitary confinement is a form of psychological torture and the damage can begin as early as 15 days. Even without those studies we know that placing a human being in a cage is in itself inhuman and isolation simply enhances the dehumanization. We know that and yet we turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to this shameful practice. When we do so we are no better than the most violent person within the facility. There is never an excuse to torture another human being in a civil society. The brain damage from isolation can be irreversible the younger the person enduring it. My son was a ***17 year old pretrial detainee***. His crime was non-violent. What he was introduced to inside Northern was the worst type of violence to his forming brain. It took many years of psychotherapy, anti-psychotic drugs (with many side effects) and numerous psychiatric hospitalizations before I even saw a glimpse of the young man who entered the prison system. That journey continues.

As a mother it was extremely painful witnessing the decline of my son's mental health. It was a journey I don't wish on anyone. As he faced mental decline so did I. There were many sleepless nights, bouts of anxiety, crying spells, panic attacks and a deep sense of helplessness as I fought to maintain my own sanity. At stake was my employment and my role as a mother to several other children. On that journey I reached out to every organization and individual that I could to assist me in getting my son removed from this "torture chamber" before he reached a point of no return. It was not easy yet I was determined I was not going to allow this facility to steal my son from me.

Torture is wrong. It is barbaric and it robs the individual of his (or her) humanity. It breaks one's spirit and one's mind. Is that our mission within Department of Corrections? If it is simply state that as a mission and end the denial about who we are and how we treat the most vulnerable in our society. The reality is that most of these people will be returned to our communities making us unsafe.

I'm hoping that Connecticut can follow the model of others who practice a more disciplined and humane correctional system. I'm hoping that this committee will do the right thing and pass this bill onto the General Assembly for passage in this session. Thank you for the opportunity to be heard.